

Governor Paul B. Johnson  
speaking at a meeting in McComb  
with Chief of police, George Guy,  
Mayor Gordon Burt, Jr.  
and Sheriff Warren

September 19, 1964

MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY  
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Speaker: Johnson, Paul B. Jr.

Other Participants: Guy, George; Burt, Gordon Jr.; Sheriff Warren

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**AU 071**

JOHNSON:

Gentlemen, the reason that I asked you to meet with me, and I am very appreciative of you doing so. Number one. This matter in Pike County has made headlines all over the country, and it is, from the evidence that we have been able to gather, it shows that there is some difficulty down here in the complete enforcement of the law. In talking with you this afternoon getting your ideas, I'd like for you to realize I'm not here on any personal basis. Anything that I have to say to you is not in the way of criticism, but we're all here for one purpose and that is to clarify this situation that exists in the county. I know that there are differences between men in this room. What those differences are is of little consequence to me. But this is not a personal matter, and the welfare of the people of this county and of the state of Mississippi has got to come before any personal differences between any two men or three men or more men in the state of Mississippi. Now, the reason that I came down to talk with you is because I felt that it was the proper thing to do before taking any action from the state's standpoint. The law permits me to come into this county when requested to do so by the Sheriff or by the Chief of Police or by the Mayor. And everyone has been cooperative. Everyone has asked for that help, and when they felt they needed it, we've been delighted to give it. But as long as there is any division among you, I don't believe we're going to be able to clarify this situation. And the reason that I had wanted to talk with you all is because if the local authorities can't handle this situation, I believe that I can. I don't want to come in here with the state police and, more or less, usurp the prerogatives of the local authorities. Never have, never expect to. I didn't expect to when I asked that this authority be granted. If I come in here and do have to take over the situation either through my state police and with Colonel Birdsong in charge or else by declaring martial law, either one that I do is going to be a mean, ugly reflection on you, on the Chief, and on the Sheriff, and all the other law enforcement officers of this county. It's going to show to the state of Mississippi and to the world that the people here who are holding public office are not capable of handling their own affairs and doing so in an expeditious manner. That is the main reason that I came down here is because that is the one thing I do not want to do. One thing, because of personal friendship. Another thing is because I know I'm not talking with newcomers or with babes in swaddling clothes. I know that if the Chief of Police and the Sheriff of this county, along with the Constables and whatever help that they need from us, I know that they can clean this situation up, because you've had years of enforcement experience. And I would like very much to hear from each one of you here at this table, your opinion about this matter. Let me know what you all feel that you can do, and whether or not, in the long run over the next few days, that you feel that...that you can get this situation straightened out yourselves with our help backing you up or else for you to let me know that you can't do it so

that I can take whatever action that I deem is necessary. And that's the main reason for my being here, and I'd like for you to be just as honest and frank with me as I'm being with you. I'm not here to hurt anybody's feelings reflect on anybody. I've made a hell of a lot of mistakes myself, and we're here for the purpose of all of us getting together and working this thing out, because, if I don't do it, you may depend on the federal government declaring martial law in this county. And once they do it in this county, they're going to do it in Greenwood. They're going to do it in Natchez and in many other counties of this state, and it's going to be like a cancer that's going to eat up the whole state and eventually mean that they will come in here and usurp the prerogatives of the state government.

GUY: Governor, we appreciate you coming down here [and in talking about a personal word or something], I think, during times like this, any personal grudge should be forgotten and work together and try to straighten this thing out in which we have had good cooperation through our sheriff's department, your department, highway patrol, and also, the FBI. And we are all working together here trying to solve this thing and I believe, with all of us working together, we can work it out and keep down any further trouble that might be in the makings.

JOHNSON: Do you feel that that can be done even though we pull our people out of here? It seems that...the reason I say that is when our people are here we don't have any trouble, and when we pull them out...

GUY: I'll say this. We have some of the men here now, and we would like to keep those men here and...to work with us to try to help the situation out. As you know, they have a meeting tonight called up there. We don't know what might happen. We can't predict anything that's going to happen, but we certainly want to be ready in case there is some trouble and have enough men available that we can handle it. I have found during this time that I have gotten good cooperation from all branches. Your FBI, your local sheriff's department, your highway patrol has been a lot of help to us. And we're very grateful to them. And we need that help, because this is a serious condition here and it's got to be worked out.

JOHNSON: Why do you feel that it hasn't been possible to work up some real cases against some of these...

GUY: That, I don't know. We are working trying every angle and running down every lead we possibly can get to try to come up with some evidence that we can pinpoint it and try to make some arrests on it.

JOHNSON: I notice a good many of the people here in this county feel that this bombing

or this shooting is being done by the Negroes. We don't feel that way. We think that the white people are involved in it too and I'd like to have your opinion on it.

GUY: I think there is a possible of both being involved, white people and Negroes. But there is a set pattern on some of these things, bombs. But I feel myself presently feel there is a great possibility that White and Colored are involved.

JOHNSON: Do you sign any outside people in here from surrounding counties like Walthall or Lincoln or Amite or Franklin? Do you see any of them in here?

GUY: Well, mostly nighttime we do our cop [inaudible] checking. We check all cars that, you might say, that come in here and we run across, Pike, Amite, Lincoln County, or Walthall or whatnot.

JOHNSON: Do you feel like any of these adjoining counties that any of the people in them are participating in this thing?

GUY: I couldn't say for sure, Governor. I don't know.

JOHNSON: Do you have any information at all that would indicate that they are? Or that they are not?

GUY: Ummm, no.

JOHNSON: How do you feel about the situation? What do think should be done?

BURT: Governor, I think that Mr. George expressed it pretty well in here. I don't know about any [little differences] that might exist in any of the law enforcement agencies that under normal circumstances, you know, when you don't have trouble. But I can assure you this much that during this recent time there hasn't been any, any [instance] of that at all. It's just been work hard and everybody working together as much as they can. I believe the thing that...I'd like to get this out, too...is the fact that these last bombings that occurred here which everybody had thought that they were through with, you know. And it kind of caught everybody flat-footed. But what it did is it crystallized whatever thinking there might be about this thing and [inaudible] it's got to stop. Now, there wasn't ever any idea of doing anything except trying to find out who did it. But of course it did get a little tense around here for the time being. But I think the Sheriff and the Police Chief, and I say it honestly, were working hand in glove. And the Highway Patrol was doing a good job. And I [inaudible] put this in. And I'll say it here, because I said it to the FBI agents. We were taking a mighty dim view of the FBI's role in this thing until just recently when we got some FBI men here that we think will [inaudible] and work with us like we think

they ought to work. There wasn't too much...and I told them this...that the lack of confidence on the part of the people and could have well been the law enforcement agencies was pretty well justified by the way they acted in prior to this time. We had a meeting last Monday, Governor, in my office. At that time we had the Sheriff, Police Chief, attorneys, and city attorneys and judges, the Highway Patrol, the FBI, and only at that meeting we put the cards on the table. We wanted to let everybody know that all stops were out. There's no covering up for anything. We want to know who did it, and we need to find who did it. Now I would like to say in justification of a town like McComb you have 18 policemen including the desk sergeants, and your job is police work and traffic work as well as investigating, which makes it kind of difficult. And people can slip up and drop a bomb before you know it and you're trying to do everything you can. I'll just give you this background on the first one that was dropped on COFO headquarters. We had just hired a Negro policeman, and he was instructed to watch that house. We didn't want anything to happen to it. [inaudible] until three o'clock in the morning and we said, "Look, we want you to watch it. We don't want nothing to happen". And then the Police Chief will verify that I instructed him to patrol not less than every 30 minutes, about that. Well, in between...it happened after three o'clock and I would say that a patrol car had been by there not over 15 or 20 minutes before it happened. That's just how that kind of thing can come up. Now, I appreciate your concern about this thing and you know I called you and talked to you and of course I think the timely steps that we took were absolutely the minimum to take under the conditions not knowing what would happen. And I talked to General [inaudible] who came down here, and we had the closest kind of liaison and we all agreed that the last thing we wanted would be [inaudible] martial law. But I believe that the...that this...these groups now are working [inaudible] determination to find out who it is. I will say that we probably do need a little help, because it's just hard to cover all the exits and movements around, especially while we're trying to find what's going on. In other words, we want preventative measures while we're trying to see if we can't come up with something.

JOHNSON: Do you feel that the people here are sufficiently disturbed over this matter to authorize you to...to make you feel free to hire additional men to...to help in them [inaudible]?

BURT: Possibly could, yes sir. I would think maybe we could...we could approach it from that angle. [inaudible].

WARREN: I've changed my working hours for my men from eight hour shifts to 12 hour shifts...to 12 hours shifts and have put most of my personnel on the last shift [inaudible] working at night [inaudible] had a lot of unmarked cars and a lot of [inaudible] working. And like the Mayor said, we're trying not only to prevent anything else from happening but at the same time

[inaudible] about this other [inaudible] and find the guilty parties and bring them in. If we have another bombing now, I'd hate to say what might happen I'd have to be frank with you, because it is a dangerous situation. We need your help and these investigators have been down here and your patrolmen. We've had help and appreciate it, and we still would like to have it, because like you say, we are a small group or body of officers down here. And they have been a lot of help in the past, and we certainly need them now to come back and stay with us until we can work this thing out somehow.

JOHNSON: Let me ask you this, Gordon. What are you all doing to locate these people besides your patrolling and your stakeouts and things of that sort?

BURT: Well, of course, I haven't been involved in the investigating procedures that are going on. I think the thing that is really [inaudible] here now is the fact that, you know, this type of thing I believe and this is well-stated by any investigative officer, is something that you have to get from information. Somebody knows and has got to talk. Bombs don't leave any fingerprints. And I believe that is the main thing that has come about now. I believe that people that might know something are saying that they need [inaudible]. And that's what I've been talking to even business people about 'cause [inaudible]. I said, "Look, if you know anything, we want to know it." Because you can't tell how it might be related to what's going on.

JOHNSON: Do you feel that the people generally down here are terrified to the extent that they are afraid to bring you the information or afraid to walk in the police headquarters and see Chief Guy or come down and tell Sheriff Warren?

BURT: No sir. [inaudible] I really don't think so at this time. I believe that...

[Break in tape]

WARREN? ...that is the patrolling part of it. Now we need someone to help us in case this thing [inaudible] need someone to patrol the highways [inaudible]. Now, we have gotten into this situation. Your Whites and Negroes both are armed pretty heavy. We're patrolling the highways, shaking them down with concealed weapons, Negroes and Whites. We're getting weapons off of all of them. We getting ammunition. We're getting buckshot. I think this thing is going to cool down. We've gotten in a position now that we're putting the heat on. A lot of people is going to get a lot of [inaudible] now, because it's getting close to home. But I believe with the information that I have that just came today, this reward is going to make somebody [talk]. Now, we have had trouble, and I'll guarantee you that we have tried. From last Sunday at two o'clock until two o'clock Thursday morning, I didn't go to bed and I don't think George did either. And we have tried with

everything we've had. We haven't had any cooperation out of the Negroes whatever. If they see a car, you've got to dig it out of them. What kind it is. What model it is. What color. They don't even try to give us any information.

JOHNSON: What do you think is the reason for them not doing that? Not having confidence in the authorities?

WARREN: Governor, I think they were instructed by COFO and NAACP not to call the local authorities. Now, I'll show you this case out here...

JOHNSON: Do you think they have that kind of a holt in this case?

WARREN: Yes sir, I do. I really do. And I think they're instructed not to call the local law enforcement agencies or call the federal. It may be for a purpose. I don't know. But to show you how this thing works, this last bomb out here, when they did finally call, they denied that they had called anyone. When we worked it out...when the head of NAACP in Tri-County called Aaron Henry, reported this bomb. They called the FBI in turn. They came back down the line. The Chief had Curtis Bryant picked up. We questioned him. He says that Matthew Jackson called him. Matthew Jackson had just gotten through telling us that he hadn't called anyone and swore to it by three other Negroes, two women and a man. Why did he want to deny he called anyone? Now if they had of called us we [inaudible] because we were accidentally...it wouldn't happen again in a thousand years...we were accidentally in position to block every road leading through that [inaudible]. And when he got out and us even [inaudible] the location, he came up and went through first to [Clinton] park. I was in Magnolia. I could have covered that end of that road. There was a patrolman going delivery on the west end of that road. We could have covered every road had we got this information. Now it looks like to me that they trying to let the man get away from us before they caught him. Why, if they had been instructed, why don't they call the local law enforcement? They're going through COFO, through NAACP, back to the FBI and sometimes it goes to Washington and comes back. It's worn out before it gets here. We've even got some of them over the wire. Came back over the wire. That's how quick it can go to Washington and get back down here. I believe that with the cooperation with the FBI at this time, they've put a different bunch of men in here. They've got some men in here that will cooperate with us. They've got some men in here that will do the job. And as far as the differences is concerned between George and me or any of us, there's not...the election's over. Sometimes I kind of wish he had of won the election for this thing [inaudible]. The election's over. [Inaudible].

[Break in tape]



WARREN:

...patrol the highways. We, with the investigators from the Highway Patrol, which they have done a wonderful job, and I've got a copy of some of the statements here and I'd like to give you, that the Highway Patrol investigators have taken. Now this thing will prove what we were talking about in this riot up here at [Alene Gwin's], the Negro woman who went to Washington. It goes here and tells you the Negro that incited the riot, he's been arrested, the Negroes that was throwing the rocks and bottles. This was done by the investigators of the Highway Patrol, which they sent this in and we made a photostatic copy of it. I don't think there's any doubt but what we can handle this situation. We've got to have the cooperation of the people, white and black. Now the question you asked about the people being afraid to give information. I'm afraid up until this point they may have been. I know the Negroes are afraid to give information and a lot of the white people are. You can see why. If you get a telephone call and say, "If you tell the officers anything, your house will be bombed tonight." What you think the man's going to do? He's not going to take a chance with his wife, his family, his kids. I wouldn't if I wasn't involved in law enforcement where if I had of been threatened...my house had been threatened to be bombed. But the way I look at it, you can only die once. And I am sick and tired of this thing. It has kept us up at night. I have worked more hours since I've been Sheriff than I think I ever worked in all my other lives put together. Even with the Highway Patrol, [inaudible]. I don't think I ever worked that many hours in one year. I'm sure that we can handle it. Now we do need some help. We're undermanned. The county or the city either one is not going to, cannot afford to hire men. In other words, you can hire a good man. It'll cost you four or five hundred dollars a month to get a man out here that can do the job. And if he can't do the job, you don't need him. It's foolish [inaudible] as it is wasteful. But with your help and with the Highway Patrol in here patrolling until we can get this thing pinned down. Now I venture to say there will be some arrests made within the next 48 hours. I think this information going to come. Some has already come. I think this thing is going to work out. But we need help [inaudible] like this meeting we got up here. We just don't have the manpower. And these boys have done a wonderful job patrolling this highway and the streets of McComb, some at Magnolia. These boys, the investigators, have done a wonderful job interrogating people, taking statements. We have some statements right here that will make you sick to read them over this writer here in [Alene Gwin] the way that thing was set up. Now, Alene tells her story that this was a couple hundred of her friends. They were the roughest friends I ever saw. Those people started marching before we got within two blocks of that house. Calling us white son-of-a-bitches, they started throwing rocks, bottles and everything else. And that's when we got out of the car and we got out with shotguns. I got out with a sawed off shotgun. You cannot use it if there's only seven or eight of you and you got 400 people over there in a mob. Therefore, we had to pull back and call the Chief of the Patrol, and I believe he talked to you that night, Governor.

JOHNSON: That's correct.

WARREN: And, when we got some men in here, we set up the [approach]. Now they're [inaudible] at setting up roadblocks. We did not. They set up patrols on the road, moving patrols. They were instructed to stop cars, search them for firearms, any type of firearms, any type of a deadly weapon. But I think this thing can be handled and we're, I think, in the process of bringing this thing to a head. And I feel like that there's a lot of people going to get threatened. There's a lot of people being threatened. I've had one or two calls today of people being threatened. But, if you will give us the help on the highway, on the patrolling part of it, I think we can handle it.

JOHNSON: And these investigators are out here. [inaudible]

WARREN: That's right. They're doing a wonderful job. We're not trained. I was trained in the Highway Patrol back in '40, but that's been a long time ago. And we're not trained to do investigative work. We do the best we can. We stay up all night and maybe don't learn what we should at that. These boys know what they're doing, and they're doing a good job.

JOHNSON: [This is] like your backyard. They're at a disadvantage, and you're right there.

WARREN: That's true.

JOHNSON: [inaudible] from the county.

WARREN: We're giving the all the cooperation we can give them and if they come to us with a list of names we give them the addresses, show them where they live, anything like that, you see. And where there's [inaudible] working together, I think this thing is going to come to a head. I think the people, white and colored both, have realized that this thing has gone as far as it can go. Now, we have tried all the way through this. It's not that we are afraid to make an arrest. We just can't get the information.

[Break in tape]

JOHNSON: ...county and city.

WARREN: Yes, sir.

JOHNSON: Sheriff, that exists in lots of places in the state.

WARREN: I know that. I know that.

JOHNSON: And that's just a human reaction.

WARREN: That's true.

JOHNSON: I wasn't down here going to any old [inaudible] talking about today and tomorrow and not yesterday.

WARREN: I just want to make it clear. The election's over or whatever. We may have...that doesn't enter into this thing.

[Break in tape]

WARREN: ...and we better be capable of it. I believe we can do the job with some help from you with the investigators and the patrol. I think we can do the job.

JOHNSON: Let me ask you, sheriff, you and Chief Guy both, since you all come to having to leave that scene the other night...and I don't blame some of them. I'd probably left, too...Do you feel that it has caused these Negroes [inaudible] to take sufficient confidence to [inaudible] if you were bound to make an arrest, you'd have to take more than two officers with you?

WARREN: Well, there is a possibility there, Governor. In the [inaudible] situation as I said there was only about seven or eight of us there, the Chief and myself, a couple of FBI agents, about three patrolmen. The only thing we thought we could [tape drags] the FBI tried to [inaudible], you want to [inaudible] our help, you'll have to fight now.

JOHNSON: You're wasting your time.

WARREN: The Negro said, "You're another white son-of-a-bitch." Threw a rock at him, hit him on his arm, knocked the [flashlight] out of his hand. Now we were in a bad position, and I'm an ex-Marine, and I don't believe it retreating. But they always taught me to take up a better position if you had to. Now we were standing there, seven or eight of us, with shotguns and pistols which would have been no [strain] at all for them to have took us over. Now, with a sawed-off shotgun, you've got six shots. That's all. You wouldn't have a chance to reload again. As I said on that thing, when we pulled in there, we were two blocks from their house when these Negroes went to cussing us and throwing these firebombs, bottles and bricks, pieces of hunks of concrete. Now, this Nigger that jumped up on top of the car said, "Go home, get your guns, kill every white son-of-a-bitch that comes up here." This is in this statement I give you. [inaudible] he admits that he got up on top of the car and made us think he was drunk, said "I don't remember saying exactly that, but I will agree I made a speech."

[break in tape]

JOHNSON: They think they've got the bluff end on the local officers. In other words, what I'm getting at, suppose we do get this thing kind of quietened down and then we leave. Do you anticipate that it's going to be just be another proposition?

WARREN: No sir, I don't. I don't believe [inaudible]. I think that they know that we can arrest them. I think, right now, until we make arrests in some of these bombings, they may be a little bit cocky about it. But they haven't got that much confidence now. They know that we can still arrest them. We try to ride two in a car where, if you do have any trouble, you've got a man there to back you up some. I don't think...in fact, we raided a house up there Saturday night [inaudible] whiskey, and we didn't have any trouble [inaudible] I don't think they have that kind of confidence in themselves.

[break in tape]

JOHNSON: ...indicating this is Negroes doing this shooting?

WARREN: This bombing you're talking about?

JOHNSON: Yeah, not white people?

WARREN: I'll say this, Governor. I think the last two definitely was Negroes. Now, I'll agree that some of this is white. Maybe hotheads. Maybe Klan. I don't know. But I think it's going to come out in the next 48 hours.

[break in tape]

WARREN: ...definitely was a set-up to help get these three Negroes in to see the [President].

[break in tape]

??? [inaudible] might suspicious [inaudible].

WARREN: Now, that's true.

??? In all of this, nobody is turning their back on anything. We only say what we feel.

[breaks in tape]

JOHNSON: ...the overall picture, see. You've had lots of bombings down here. And that hasn't come from Negroes.

WARREN: I think the majority of it [inaudible]. I think the last two, the Negroes used this to...and thought it would be charged to the Whites and get by with it for the simple reason there was no damage. I mean, it was placed just right, say, three feet up out of the road and in the yard. Tore a hole about like that [inaudible] one stick of dynamite and that's all. The majority of it, I think, has been by white people. I think...

BURT The timing of them getting out of that house, you see, that's unusual. And the timing of them moving those people out of the house. In fact the business, I don't even know where they live.

??? The supermarket bombing up here. They haven't called us until yet.

[Everyone talking at one time. Inaudible]

??? [inaudible] 30 or 40 minutes before they called the police officers down there. I had a man within two blocks when it happened, but I'd given him instructions that next time they had a bombing, don't go up there by themselves and it's a good thing he didn't. He came back to the office and got two men and went back up there. 'Course they [inaudible], you know.

[break in tape]

WARREN: [inaudible] people go down and want to use the church for meetings. The Board of Deacons or whatever you might have in that church voted it out. This fellow Harris, who is head of COFO, made the statement that your church would probably be bombed anyway. Now, we can prove that by the pastor of the church. We've got statements from Negro women down there, and Negro men that heard this statement. I mean, there's some of these things that would lead you to believe it was being done by COFO or the Negroes. And I'll admit that I think the majority of it was done by Whites. I think it's hotheads or whatever you might have, and I think we're getting a lot closer home than we've ever [inaudible].

[break in tape]

BURT: My opinion...and I've expressed this opinion to the Sheriff and the Police Chief...that what we need right now with developments coming in is all of the...is preventative measures so that we can be...something won't happen. Because whoever's doing it is not going to do it with as much activity. Until we can come up with something, say, look, [I think] we've got somebody that we want to really...to make charges against for doing this, you see.

[break in tape]

WARREN: ...this, too. On the night after this Alene [Gwin] bombing which was

Sunday night. The next morning early, oh, 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning, the Highway Patrol...two of the patrolmen picked up a car with seven Negroes in it and had one of these Molotov cocktails.

[break in tape]

WARREN: And I got one for you and the Colonel. [This is a true statement.] That is the roughest thing I've ever seen. I don't know whether y'all have seen one of them or not.

JOHNSON: Oh, we've been collecting them for months.

WARREN: That thing there...

JOHNSON: [inaudible]

WARREN: That's the worst thing I've seen, and it's being circulated through this COFO house here. Is there any way that we can get COFO to move out out there?

[break in tape]

JOHNSON: ...don't know of any way. I have voiced a complaint to the Justice Department and to the President and all the rest of them, and they don't look at it the same way that we do.

WARREN: They're not even looking at our side of the story.

JOHNSON: Right and because of their actions I'm determined that they're not only soft on communism abroad, but at home

[break in tape]

JOHNSON: Well, I think that now that would not do any good, because you've got a campaign going...

**END OF RECORDING**